



Tales of smoked fish, fur hats and Egypt

by Catherine Morrison

I don't usually have a lot of trouble getting people to talk about the interesting goods and services they are buying, especially since much public sector purchasing tends to reflect some of the best things that public sector organizations do. Not to mention what a powerful indicator this purchasing activity is of the country's economic status (see the Purchasing Index, page 15).

For this issue's column, however, it's been like pulling teeth. Service providers will tell you there's a contract chill over the land. Perhaps the chill goes even deeper, with public sector organizations everywhere you look reeling under the stress of media and public scrutiny.

First case in point: no response from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture the first time I tried to get information about a study being tendered to provide information on the prevalence and distribution of microbial pathogens in smoked fish. Maybe it had something to do with my timing – just then the Alymer beef processing brouhaha was busting out all over.

In any case, the smoked fish study seems like a good thing for government to be doing. According to the background information in the RFP, Ontario produces more than 500 tonnes of smoked fish annually, most of it in federally registered facilities under the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). But, in the province, 51 small smokers have been identified that, together, are estimated to produce 100 tonnes of smoked product annually. These small processors are not presently regulated, either by the CFIA or by the province.

Anyhow, *weeks* later, after a second call to the Ministry and after the column has already been submitted, edited and sent off for layout, I get a call-back with a contact name. But the telephone number I'm given by media relations is an outgoing number only! Finally, I manage to get the right number for Gavin Downing, coordinator for the Fish Program under the Food Safety Policy Branch. He confirms that what researchers are being asked to look for especially – across the board, not just at the small smokers – is a microorganism called *listeria monocytogenes*. According to the RFP, this little bug has been identified elsewhere in the world as a "potentially significant hazard" for humans. Listeriosis, which is what humans get from the microbe, can show itself as meningitis, abortion and prenatal septicemia. You can imagine how I might interpret the lengthy silence as a desire to keep a lid on this one.

Fortunately, I had a good news story in the works: CIDA inviting proposals for the implementation and management of a \$20 million project to support business development services for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Egypt. According to the RFP, the project is meant to enhance the capacity of Egyptian business development service providers to deliver non-financial business services that: "respond to the needs of marginalized groups (in particular women and youth); are environmentally sensitive; are cognizant of child protection issues; and, take a business-like approach to service delivery (sustainability through cost-recovery) ..." The objectives could hardly be more laudable.

The role of the service provider being sought includes managing and implementing the project, providing expert advice to Egyptian business development services organizations, preparing work-plans in consultation with these organizations, and, once the capacity is established, transferring managerial responsibilities to an appropriate Egyptian authority. Sounds like an ideal model for the delivery of foreign aid, something Canada can be proud to get behind.

But, understandably, no one at CIDA was talking while the RFP was still open. And then the deadline for submission was extended, and I knew editor Anne would be getting cranky about missed copy deadlines at her end, though not as cranky as she was going to be when she had to pull the column back to deal with Listeriosis. Ah well.

Finally, there was the case of the muskrat hats. What could be more innocuous than muskrat hats? So uninteresting is the subject of muskrat hats, according to the quartermaster for the Edmonton Police Force, which is buying these hats, that the Force was "not interested in having any articles written" about them.

Which, of course, did nothing but ramp up my fascination with muskrat hats. Luckily, one of the manufacturers of muskrat police hats kindly agreed to tell me about their flagship product. Gerber Enterprises of Canada, based in Winnipeg, makes muskrat hats for police forces across the country, including the RCMP, which was the first force to recognize the wintry pleasures of the furry headgear.

According to Emiko, Gerber's sales coordinator, the hats can be described as "kind of a bomber hat with the flaps flipped up." The crown of the hat may be made of poly-cotton or even wool, with a cozy band of muskrat over the forehead, and muskrat earflaps that can be deployed over the ears and fastened endearingly in place under the chin with strings. Are you getting the picture? Not exactly a fashion statement, but oh-so-Canadian, eh?

Gerber makes 50,000 of these items a year. A tenth of them are sold in the US and some even get snapped up by the Japanese! Truly, what can be learned out there in the purchasing world is wondrous. ♪

Catherine Morrison, a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec, has been published in the Ottawa Citizen and the Globe and Mail's print and online editions, as well as in Canadian Consumer, Asia Pacific Magazine, the Edmonton Journal and C.A.R.P. Magazine. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg and a contributing editor and columnist for Winnipeg Magazine.

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